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ABSTRACT

It is often difficult for students in public relations writing courses to understand precisely how their various writing assignments are being evaluated. It is important, therefore, for teachers of these courses to develop a systematic method of evaluating all writing assignments. One method of doing this is to concentrate on elements common to all such assignments. These are (1) purpose--what the writing is to make a public think or do; (2) persuasive strategy--how copy achieves its purpose; (3) medium--the appropriate style, format, and presentation; (4) accuracy--the facts, grammar, spelling, and punctuation; (5) creativity--originality in approach, strategy, and use of medium; and (6) effectiveness--why a piece of writing did or did not work. As each writing assignment is made, the teacher might give the students a "prewriting form," to help them focus their work. (A copy of a prewriting form is attached.) (FL)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING: SETTING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS AND EVALUATING THEIR WORK

TEACHING STANDARDS PAPER

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PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING: SETTING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS AND EVALUATING THEIR WORK

What is it that makes an effective public service announcement, a persuasive position paper, a compelling piece of brochure copy? The diversity of demands in public relations writing often overwhelmsstudents, initially, at least.

Still more difficult to explain to students in PR writing courses projects often is precisely how the papers are being evaluated. Students need to understand how they can compare their success or failure with the great variety in assignments to reach some conclusions about their progress in the course.

Writing courses especially should be measured on the progressive improvement over time in the course. Because of that, there should be some way to arrive at a common expectation from all of these various assignments, which on the surface seem so different.

One approach is to look at the expectations held for all assignments. A starting place there is to examine how the piece of writing advances the purpose of the public relations effort. What does it try to get someone to think or to do? Secondly, how does it try to get the audience to think or to do something? Or, what is the persuasive strategy? An analysis of these two elements will lead directly to a critical part of the evaluation: To whom is the piece of copy intended? What public is to receive the message statement?

The analysis of purpose, strategy and publics should lead a public relations copy writer to review social scientific research findings in the fields of communication and persuasion. What does the literature offer as a guide to developing a message for the particular situation? In looking for some guidance from the research, a public relations copy writer should not have unrealistic expectations, such as finding the exact, precise answer to a copy writing problem. What is more likely to be found is some guidance. The writer has to take into consideration the limitations of applying research findings to real-life situation, if the findings come from a controlled study, and the limitations of applying the research to a different set of circumstances, if the research findings are from field studies. The thoughtful writer only looks to the research for some suggestions for an approach that is more likely to work than an uneducated guess.

In working out a public relations writing assignment, the copy writer has to take into consideration the three basic elements: message, medium and audience. These are all interrelated, but the key element to work with is first the message. Then, the second consideration is how to convey that message to each audience, or public so that the message will first, get the attention of that public, attract the interest of that public as being significant, important, something of value, and, finally, give that public something to act on--either physically, emotionally or intellectually. The action, of course, should be the one desired by the public relations copy writer to achieve the purpose of the communication.

Any sound public relations writing assignment should give the message writer enough information about the purpose and the publics involved to determine a message statement for each public, and to develop a strategy for each public. How message statements to various publics interact and reinforce each other is a significant part of the evaluation if the writing assignment covers a broad scope--such as the multiple messages for a public relations campaign. The lack of clean lines between many publics, and the interrelationships that often occur among publics make this an important consideration for the writers.

A third element to look at, then, is how appropriate each message statement is for each public, and how much unity there is in the message statements, although the appeal and persuasive strategy might be different for different publics. (An example students seem to understand easily is how different messages might be written for two publics--faculty and students, although there should be unity in the statements because each public is likely to be exposed to the other's message.)

After the publics and the message statements for each are clearly defined, the next step is to look again at research information to determine what is the most appropriate medium through which to reach that public. To which medium is that public most likely to attend? Which medium, for that particular public, has the highest credibility? Then, the next part of the problem is to see how the message statement can be conveyed through that medium. What barriers exist? For

example, it may be that some information about drug use you want to convey to a teenage public. How do you reach them? Radio may be best, but is it best for a message that must be detailed and specific? A message that needs to be remembered? A message that may need to be referred to? Obviously not. Then, looking at print media, which is best for that public? Would it be a brochure that could be given out in school health classes? Or, would getting a story in some teenage magazines be best? Which publics are you likely to miss if you choose the latter? Should more than one medium be considered? What is a multi-faceted approach in media that is likely to work for this message for this audience?

Following quite logically is how appropriate each piece of copy is for the medium for which it is written. How will the copy be used? Is the style right? Is the format correct? Is the information presented in such a way that it will be received by the audience, considering how that audience is known or expected to behave with that medium?

Anticipated, of course, is that the facts will be accurate and that the copy will be written clearly, directly and correctly--with respect to grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Public relations writers often find that as practitioners they do not have the luxury of an editor to catch mistakes before publication, so that careful preparation of copy is discipline best learned early.

A fifth point there is accuracy--in fact and presentation. Being accurate sometimes becomes especially difficult when the public relations copy writer must translate information from the jargon of a particular professional area to something any public can understand. Problems also occur when the public relations copy writer must simply the complex. For example, in efforts to talk to 10 to 13 year olds about how they need to develop life style habits now to avoid premature death from cardiovascular disease, what does the writer have to know about that audience to determine how simplified the copy must be made? How simple can it be made without compromising the scientific information and risking the loss of credibility by the medical and scientific community? What terms do the youngsters perhaps need to learn, and how can they be taught? Often, problems like this call for some testing of copy to help arrive at just the right approach--testing both with the age group and with the medical and scientific community. And, of course, testing even before any public sees the copy with standard readability formulas to be sure the level of the writing is correct for both the audience and the medium.

A sixth point for evaluation is creativity. How original is the appeal, the presentation, the choice of strategy, the use of the medium? The good public relations writer is the one who breaks through the barriers to getting the attention of a public with the creative approach, and beginning writers should have their originality recognized and rewarded.

Finally, and number seven, does the copy work? Do all of these elements come together with an impact that makes the elements seem to be more than a sum of the parts? Usually this is the most difficult part to discuss in student work because there is only the instructor's professional judgment -- although the preceding analysis often helps to suggest why the communication breaks down.

To reinforce this pattern of expectations, and to offer some guide to grading, the following forms have been developed. The first form is a pre-writing outline to give the assignment focus. Concentration on the various elements is forced by filling in this outline. It helps a beginning writer to see the direction the communication should take, and for a more experienced writer, it keeps the communication within the requirements while allowing for some originality of approach. The second form is an evaluation piece, one designed to give some consistency to grades in a course that demands a great diversity in assignments. One word of caution: The evaluation chart should not substitute for a detailed critique of the written piece, including corrective markings on the student's copy. What the chart can do is (1) to give students some guidelines on what is weak in their work--areas that need improving; (2) to suggest why a piece of writing fails as a whole, although parts of it may be good; (3) to indicate, over time, what students are learning in the course, and what seems to be eluding them. The latter can also be helpful to the instructor who may be able to see a pattern in the class that indicates more attention to some principles

or practices that need further explanation or emphasis.

Any instructor in a public relations copy writing course should expect to be called on to answer a challenge from students about why something is being written at all? Isn't that manipulation? a student is likely to ask. An explanation can begin with a question like "How did your parents get you to brush your teeth when you were younger?" What message statements were used? To what effect? Sometimes another direction is better: "How did you get your parents to let you use the family car when you were just beginning to drive?" What was the persuasive strategy? What was the medium--verbal, and if so was timing important? Wat it better to leave a note asking and then approach the parent after the smoke from the first explosion had cleared? Put in terms of everyday persuasion that does not seem insidious, students can begin to understand that not all efforts to manipulate are morally wrong. However, students should be encouraged to look carefully at the ethics of all given tasks, especially public relations copy writing tasks. What are the ethical considerations? What problems may a public relations copy writer face in dealing with management over the communication plan? There is no way to chart these two significant points, but each public relations copy writing assignment should cause a writer to look at social responsibility and management acceptance. Both are critical to the task.

PRE-WRITING FORM

Project: (Nature of Project)

Contact: (Resource Person(s))

Student: _____

Objective: (Purpose)

_____

Publics: (What audiences need to be reached)

Description of Message Statement Form: ("As one page typed - double spaced News Release to be mailed to 49 local newspapers.")

Main points to be covered in expanded message statement to achieve purpose:

Draft needed by: (date)

Finished copy needed by: (date)

Distribution method: _____

Comments: (Special Guidance)

Message: (Statements for Each Public)

Medium: (For each public for this situation.)

Grade _____

Purpose (What public is to think or do)	Persuasive Strategy (How does copy achieve purpose)	Public & Message Statements (Appeals, Appropriateness, Unity)	Medium (Appropriate Style, Format, Presentation)	Accuracy (Facts, Grammar, Spelling, Punctuation)	Creativity (Originality in Approach, Presentation, Strategy, Use of Medium)	Effectiveness (Does piece work? Why? Why not?